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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the author's experiences teaching a high school class after ten years of teaching college-level secondary education students. The author tells how she arranged to teach a short-story course in a local high school and how she organized the course around small-group and individual activities through the use of activity cards. Student earned points for each activity completed; course grades were based on the total number of points earned. The paper reports many of the classroom activities employed, including discussing short-story elements, writing stories based on pictures, enacting key scenes from stories, taping characters' dialogue, and presenting oral book reports. Films were used to supplement the short stories; a collection of adolescent novels was provided to stimulate outside reading. Benefits which the author gained from the experience included increased credibility with her college students and with teachers in inservice programs, as well as a renewed realization of the importance of such aspects of teaching as variety, flexibility, and involvement of students in what goes on in the classroom. The author urges other college methods teachers to make a similar trip back to the secondary classroom. (GW)

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YOU CAN GO HOME AGAIN: A COLLEGE METHODS TEACHER RETURNS TO THE SECONDARY CLASSROOM

Perhaps a title for this paper that is more in keeping with the theme of the Conference would be "Teaching Without the Frame." In describing his choice of a motorcycle as the mode of travel, Robert Pirsig says in Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance:

> You see things vacationing on a motorcycle in a way that is completely different from any other. In a car you're always in a compartment, and because you're used to it you don't realize that through that car window everything you see is just more TV. You're a passive observer and it is all moving by you boringly in a frame.
>
> On a cycle the frame is gone. You're completely in contact with it all. You're in the scene, not just watching it anymore, and the sense of presence is overwhelming. That concrete whizzing by five inches below your foot is the real thing, the same stuff you walk on, it's right there, so blurred you can't focus on it, yet you can put your foot down and touch it anytime, and the whole thing, the whole experience, is never removed from immediate consciousness. (p. 4)

This cycle-view is what it is like to return to secondary English teaching after ten years in a college classroom teaching HOW to teach secondary English: "the frame is gone . . .You're in the scene, not just watching it anymore, and the sense of presence is overwhelming."

This "sense of presence" is what I want to share with you in the hope that you will be able to apply my experience to your own situation. It will not be a substitute for the REAL thing, but maybe you can draw from it in putting your own experience into practice.

First, How do you get back into a secondary classroom? Well, it isn't easy. I tried for over five years. In our area, the secondary schedule was the rigid semester structure with English as a two-semester course. (You know, the English I, II, III, IV curriculum.) With this structure it was

CS 203 466

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impossible for anyone to teach only one class for a semester. The summer sessions were always spoken for by the regular secondary teachers. With these avenues closed, other ways to get into the classroom were attempted. I began coordinating student-teachers, volunteering to teach a class or two for a local teacher, attending workshops for secondary teachers, and even offering workshops for secondary teachers, hoping that something of their experiences would rub off on me. I tried everything, but it was not the same and I knew it.

The key to this barrier is perserverance. Keep trying. Convince both the college and the secondary administration that you are serious. Have your state teaching certificate updated, or if you don't have one, apply for it. Keep the administrators informed of your actions. Let it be known that you are "qualified" to teach in the secondary schools. Situations on both college and secondary levels are constantly changing. Be ready to take advantage of the slightest opportunity.

Im my case, the secondary schools changed their curriculum to one with nine-week electives. This allowed for much more flexibility in scheduling teachers and students. It was now possible to teach only one class for a 45-day period. On the college scene, there arrived a new President who was especially interested in faculty using their areas of expertise for community service. I was ready. In the spring I prepared a proposal presenting my reasons for wanting secondary experience and listed the benefits for both the school and the college. That fall I was scheduled for a class in one of the local high schools. (I had arranged all my college classes for late afternoon or evening so that I could be ready to teach any period at the high school.) Since this additional class was an overload on my part, I chose the second quinmester so that those classes would overlap our first and second semesters. (I also had to give up a week of my college holidays at Christmas time, but

that was a small piece to pay for this opportunity.) As things turned out, at the last minute the college gave me released time first semester to teach the class and that also solved the problem of who would pay for my time. One-fifth of one-fourth of a classroom teacher's salary, even with a Ph.D., isn't very much in my state. I was willing to teach for nothing, but I didn't refuse the released time!

I had two months to anticipate the class and to wonder whether or not I could survive. I had to anticipate in the abstract because, like the regular teachers, I only had a few days' notice as to which course it would be.

THE COURSE:

The course was an elective entitled "The Advanced Short Story" and the enrollment was 36 students, grades 10-12 with ability levels ranging from 3-9 on a scale 1-9 with 9 being highest. There were 15 males and 21 females; 31 white students and 5 black. Twenty-two students were on the 10 grade level. I had always had my methods students prepare their teaching assignments for a heterogeneous class. Now it was my turn.

Remembering my past experience in secondary teaching, I prepared a handout for the first class meeting. (I am notorious for my handouts in methods classes.) This was a combination information sheet and questionnaire on what they knew about short stories and what their likes and dislikes were. Nothing can describe the combined state of eagerness and anxiety I experienced that first day as the students came in and took their seats. (I didn't have enough chair-desks for 36, but then they were never all present.) My anxiety quotient was not helped any when I saw one student at the back of the classroom mimicing my hand movements as I talked. I would like to say that that cured me of this habit, but it did make me more conscious of it. The textbooks were not available for distribution that day so the lesson I had planned for the

second day had to be revised. I knew what I had meant when I told methods students that lesson plans should be flexible.

The bell rang. The first day of class was over. I had survived; the students had cooperated. Only 44 more days.

THE STUDENTS:

Like any beginning teacher, my greatest concern had been the students. What would they be like? I knew they were different from the students of the late 50's and early 60's--the students I had taught in secondary school. Would I be able to reach them? Would they accept me as a teacher? The questionnaire used the first day to find out about them and the discussion that resulted from it helped to carry us through that first class. The mimic at the back of the class helped me to become aware of the fact that secondary students would not be as tolerant of "pet habits" as are college students, or at least not as polite about them.

The second day also taught me something about today's secondary students. They have been programmed to accept interruptions more readily than I have. When the public address system came on with an announcement in the middle of the short story tape I was playing, they did not complain and were ready to continue the lesson after the announcement. I was the one whose blood pressure went up!

Variety appealed to the students. They were interested in hearing story tapes that I had made and were eager to tape activities of their own. They liked to work individually or in small groups. They were not responsive to large "total" class discussions. Most especially, they disliked getting before the class for any reason. They liked to be rewarded for what they did and would work to improve their scores if direction and encouragement were offered.

Not every student responded to the course however. There was one student who dropped out after several weeks, and a senior boy whose attendance was poor worked in his own group but just would not attempt much work on his own. It is hard for a teacher to accept the fact that students have the right to fail. If they are given every opportunity to complete the course assignments and they refuse even to attempt to do so, there is very little that the teacher can do.

I realize that I did not have any seriously "disruptive" students in the class, nor did I have any who were not able to read at all. Several had reading problems but without the pressure of specific deadlines for assignments, they were able to proceed at their own pace and were able to accomplish their goals in the class. I had the usual goof-offs and clowns, but with the use of individual assignments, I was able to be at strategic locations to keep them working.

There was one complication that I had not forseen--excessive student absenteeism. Of the 36 students only 4 had perfect attendance. Then, of course, there were the excused absences; chorus and band trips, pictures to be made for the annual, ROTC functions, and the like. This class was first period. I shutter to think what last period would be like.

FORMAT:

This brings up the problem of classroom organization. Luckily, I had planned to organize the class around small group activities and individual activities using the Moffett-styled Activity Cards. Each activity would earn the student a certain number of points depending on the quality of the work done in response to the card directions, and grades would be based on the number

of points acquired. In this way students would be able to move at their own pace and would have some choices as to the activities they did. This organization saved me many of the frustrations of the other teachers who had regularly scheduled assignments and tests. Another complication was that tests in English (as in other subjects) could only be given on a certain day of the week.

Because the class was a genre course, I organized by using the elements of the short story: Characterization, Plot, Setting, Theme, Point of View, Tone, and Symbolism. The first several class periods were devoted to "experiencing the short story" by reading "The Snipper" and the complementary poem "The Man He Killed" and to discuss/ing the short story elements of "The Open Window." This last activity was done by dividing the class into small groups and giving each group an activity card which defined the term to be studied and then gave specific questions by which the students were able to identify the short story elements corresponding to their term. The teacher-led discussion which followed helped the students see the relationship of all the elements to the total effect of the story. This activity introduced the class to both small group work and the use of activity cards. This was not an easy lesson and could not be completed in a single class period, but it was a vital one for the students.

Early in the second week, before concentrated study had begun, the students and I examined the poster-sized pictures that were on two of the classroom walls. That class period was spent in creating short story characters, settings, and conflicts that the pictures suggested. The students brought their own pictures the following day and wrote original short stories about them. (Of course, there were extra pictures available for those who did not have one or for those who wished to exchange theirs for another.) These stories were placed in the students' folders until later in the course when they would see the teachers's comments and then rewrite their stories. The students enjoyed this

activity and some revisions were quite effective.

Most of the course was spent in studying the short story elements and their contribution to the total story. The basic procedure was to begin with a small group activity followed by individual work from the activity cards. The group activities varied from discussion with composite answers to specific questions, to the making of collages, or the enacting of a key scene--perhaps the crises of the plot. The individual activities asked students to locate words and phrases used by the author to describe characters, events, settings, to make tapes of characters' conversations both actual and imagined, to tape or read aloud a monologue of a character's thoughts during a key scene, to rewrite passages in another dialect, to write a newspaper article about the events of the story, to locate in the printed media examples of behavior described in the stories, and the like. The most important thing was to get the student involved in a concrete way with the story. The students seemed to enjoy this approach and there was little trouble in the groups. Students joined in the discussions, in composing the collages, and in the other activities. Their only reluctance was in sharing orally with the rest of the class what they had done either in groups or individually.

To help them overcome this aversion to talking before the entire class, toward the end of the course each student had to present a "creative" book report similar to those described in Isabelle Decker's 100 Novel Ways with Book Reports (Citation Press, $2.50). Each student presented a report, but this was still a chore for most of them. However, with something to read to the class or explain to the class, the chore was accomplished with some semblance of good grace.

MATERIALS:

Materials were a problem in this course. (Where have I heard that statement before?) Because of budgetary restrictions, the course had to be taught from a literature anthology with a section on short stories. I was able to

supplement from short story collections in the school library. I checked them out to the room where students could use them for additional acitvities. About midway in the course, the play Triffles was used to change the format of the class. Students read the parts and then did activities on conflict and theme. The students also were able to review the similarities and the differences between the short story and the drama.

Another means of supplementing the course materials was the use of films. Short Story Showcase films were especially good. The students had mixed responses to Hemingway's "My Old Man"; their response to "The Lottery" was very intense. I had to move quickly into a discussion of allegory to calm some of them. The movie that provoked a great deal of controversy and which offered a good activity on Point-Of-View was "The Lady or the Tiger." After a prolonged discussion of who was behind the door, I asked students to think about the various characters who could tell the story. They were encouraged to extend the list beyond those actually mentioned in the story: The lover's mother would have an interest in the events of the story and its outcome. Surely the king had a trusted advisor to offer suggestions about the characters and the nature of justice. What about someone who was a spectator at the arena? How would his account of the story differ? We listed the possible narrators on the board and gave each a number. Then the students drew numbered slips out of a paper bag. They then rewrote the story as if the narrator whose number they had drawn were telling it. The results were very good--even that of the students who had drawn the number of the Tiger! Again the individual papers were good, but the students were reluctant to read them to the rest of the class. Early in the course, Crane's The Red Badge of Courage was shown over television. Those students who watched the program asked for activity cards to do for extra credit. The program also fit well with the study of "The Mystery of Heroism," an anthology story by the same author. Although the course focused on the

short story, I used a collection of adolescent novels to stimulate outside reading. Students read these eagerly. (At least they checked them out to read.) Any student who wanted credit for reading a novel had to prepare a creative report on the novel. The books were constantly being checked out and returned much like the "Hooked on Books" system, but only a few reports came in.

Organization around the use of activity cards supplemented by small group activities and a few total class activities like reading the play and viewing the films was quite effective. One word of advice though. Writing cards for 36 students on approximately 15 short stories can be rather time consuming! I felt then that each card should be different, and really when you begin writing them the ideas just seem to flow. But the time involved is almost astronomical. I was able to do this for one class; however, this would not be possible with several different classes. Any full-time teacher who did not have time prior to the beginning of the course to prepare the cards would do well to begin on a small scale--perhaps a short two-week unit--and build toward a more elaborate collection. Commercial cards are available but they are expensive and the teacher-made cards are more appropriate since they can be written to fit specific student needs. One discovery I made about writing activities was that my natural tendency, or should I say training, was to have the student respond in writing. Then I had all that writing to correct; and if the students revised, I had just that much more. Of necessity, I soon learned to think of non-writing responses that would show that the student understood the concept involved. Students were encouraged to tape their response, to enact the crisis, to make a college representing use of symbols. Such non-written responses could be evaluated without resorting to red pencils and detailed comments.

EVALUATION:

As I mentioned before, each activity had a certain number of points attached to it, usually 1-5. Students were able to acquire points according to the quality of the work presented as a response to the activity. Some activities such as vocabulary study, some group work, and some total class activities were evaluated by checks, pluses, or minuses. These were collected under the heading of classwork and became a major score. The other categories corresponded to the elements studied with additional scores for writing the short story, for the oral presentation of an additional story, and for, that most beloved category of all, extra credit. Each category had a certain point designation. For example, Characterization required 15 points: Five points could be acquired by the group work and the remaining ten by doing two individual activities of 5 points each or one more difficult activity worth 10 points. The extra credit score contained such items as a book report or an extra credit activity such as the ones for the TV program. Other extra credit activities might require the student to work with two or more of the stories or might have the student respond in a more imaginative or personal way than would the regular activities. This category was closely supervised by the teacher and could be used only to bring up scores in several categories, never as a substitute for activities in a specific category.

Students were given a mid-quin report that told them what the average score should be at this point in the course, what their score was, and what work they need to do--the categories and points needed. The students were also given their evaluation sheet on the last day of class so that they would know their grade range in the course and could discuss it with the teacher if they thought it was necessary. Several days had been designated work days so that the students could catch up in their work. The day before Thanksgiving and the day after the Christmas holidays were used for this purpose since attendance would be so poor.

Perhaps from this glimpse into a secondary English classroom, other college methods teachers will be encouraged to make the trip back to the "source." The benefits are immeasurable. It will do much to strengthen their relationship with their methods students. I find that I now have much more credibility with these students. I can talk about today's secondary students in today's secondary classroom because I have been there recently and the students know this. I can share with them the materials produced by my students, and the methods students know that they are seeing "the real thing." They can even compare the responses that secondary students have made to activities that they themselves have done in the methods class. This more than all the reading about student work helps them to see the range of capabilities of their potential students. Another area where credibility is important is in working with experienced teachers in in-service programs or in graduate courses. My secondary classroom experience has earned me the respect of these teachers. My statements have the sound of experience. I am no longer behind the frame watching what is going on in <u>their</u> classrooms. I am <u>in</u> the scene.

The most important benefit, however, is that of self-image. I have proved to myself that I can do it. I can go into a secondary classroom and be an effective teacher. Those things that I read in a textbook and pass on to my methods class now are tempered with my recent experiences. Now I <u>know</u> that students respond best when they are involved in what is happening in the classroom, that variety is important not only for the student but also for the teacher, that small group activities are difficult but worthwhile, that teachers do spend too much time in filling out forms and making reports, that students do need a sense of community and supportive reinforcement to do their best work, that no matter how hard one tries there are some students who will

not be responsive in the short amount of time that is alloted for a class, that flexibility is the key to survival, that teaching is hard work, and most importantly, that teaching is rewarding.

With apologies to a N. C. neighbor named Wolfe, you <u>can</u> go home again--even if it is only for special occasions and for a short visit. In the student evaluations after the short story class, one of the secondary students said that she enjoyed the class because the teacher tried. I guess that is all anyone can be asked to do--try. And the best place for an English methods teacher to try is in a secondary classroom.

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